



Leon, Philip. Walt Whitman and Sir William Osler [review]

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PHILIP W. LEON. *Walt Whitman and Sir William Osler: A Poet and His Physician*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1995. 212 pp.

William Osler (1849-1919) was the foremost physician of the nineteenth century. "Simply stated," writes Philip Leon at the beginning of this book, "at his death in 1919, Osler was the best-known and most widely respected medical doctor in the world" (13). During his long and distinguished career, he cared for many literary notables, including Owen Wister, Edmund Gosse, Edith Wharton, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and both William and Henry James. During the years he lived in Philadelphia (from 1884 to 1889, when he left to accept a professorship at Johns Hopkins Hospital), Osler attended Walt Whitman at the request of Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, Whitman's loyal Canadian disciple. Osler (also a Canadian) and Bucke were old friends, and Leon traces their friendship, reminding readers that Dr. Bucke was the first President of the American Medico-Psychological Association (now known as the American Psychiatric Association) and that his *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*, first published in 1901, has never been out of print. During his final years, then, Whitman was attended to by some formidable physicians.

Just prior to his death in 1919, Osler prepared a speech, "Walt Whitman: An Anniversary Address with Personal Reminiscences," which is now in the Osler Papers at McGill University in Montreal and which Leon includes as the "centrepiece of this study" in Chapter 2 of the book (20-26). While very general in scope, Osler's incomplete address does report interesting details, such as Whitman's "high-pitched, . . . clear and musical" voice (21). Osler's intended audiences for this speech included both the students in Sir Walter Raleigh's English class at Oxford University (where Osler had gone as a professor in 1905) and the members of the City Temple Literary Society. Osler's failing health did not allow him to finish the speech, and his death prevented his ever delivering it. Leon treats Osler's partial draft as a kind of scripture and devotes Chapter 3 of his book to an extended, line-by-line gloss on Osler's address. In Chapter 4, he offers an explication of Osler's rough notes that were appended to his manuscript.

Leon argues that Osler's influence on modern medicine parallels Whitman's influence on modern literature. While Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* influenced generations of poets, Osler's medical textbook, *Principles and Practice of Medicine* (1892), became the standard guide for several generations of physicians. Osler's commitment to medical ethics and to the study of the history of medicine directly affected physicians around the world. His insistence upon the principles of a good bedside manner in the healing of the sick continues to influence patient care: "Osler believed that a concerned and reassuring physician could be efficacious to a patient" (67). While many patients today wax nostalgic over such bedside manner and mourn its disappearance from the modern practice of medicine, such emphasis in patient care was in fact a relatively new development when Osler attended Whitman in Camden. And, it turns out, Whitman didn't care for the technique. Drawing on Horace Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, Leon demonstrates that the poet's personal distaste for Osler as his physician resulted from Whitman's preference for a

recommended regimen for recovery over his physician's positive attitude in the sickroom.

In the appendix to this book, Leon includes all the materials from the first six volumes of *With Walt Whitman in Camden* that specifically relate to Osler (there are additional brief mentions in the recently published eighth and ninth volumes). Leon also includes from the collection at Johns Hopkins University useful and previously unpublished correspondence between Osler and the two most influential members of the Bolton College group of Whitman enthusiasts, Dr. John Johnston and J. W. Wallace. Leon's discussion of the relationship of Bucke and Osler to the Bolton College (Chapter 6) represents perhaps one of the best discussions of the group generally, especially when he explores the group's dedication to socialism and their interest in "sexual inversion" (their term for homosexuality).

Leon reports that Harvey Cushing, Osler's biographer, has noted that Osler recorded "the secrets of the heart in the covers of his books" and that his marginalia constitute "an intimate record" (62). I admire Leon for seeking Osler's secrets in his scattered notes and comments, but the interpretation of marginalia is a risky business—as are conjectures about an unfinished speech—and many readers may become irritated with Leon's continual use of verbal hedges like "maybe," "might," "possibly," "probably," and so on. Similarly, Leon's judgment of past medical practices in terms of present ones, while often interesting, remains unsatisfying. For example, when discussing Whitman's desire, referred to above, of wanting a regimen of medicines instead of a comforting manner, Leon writes: "Of course, the dramatically effective medicines now available were largely unknown in Osler's time, and it would be unwise to presume that he would feel the same reluctance if he were practising today" (67).

Leon also shows some confusion about the various editions of *Leaves of Grass*, claiming for instance that there were "four more editions" after the 1881-82 edition (18). And he often pushes aspects of the relationship between Osler and Whitman beyond the causal to the unproven or merely coincidental, as when he equates their very different books: "Osler's *Principles and Practice of Medicine* was, in a sense, his own *Religio Medici*. It outlines with grace and style how a doctor should practice. In a similar manner *Leaves of Grass* presented Whitman's world view . . ." (89). We learn in Chapter 5 ("On the Brains of Whitman and Osler") that the postmortem brains of both men ended up at the Wistar Institute of Anatomy and Biology, the repository of the American Anthropometric Society (99)—again a coincidence, but an interesting one nonetheless.

Leon tends to pose rhetorical questions, often of more interest to Oslerites than to Whitman scholars: "To what degree did Osler's ambitious industry, his warmth of personality, his desire to elevate humanity—all attributes that were shared by Whitman—allow him to rise above the mere mechanics of his 'surgery, anatomy' and in 'honest haughtiness and self-esteem' become one of the medical profession's most revered figures?" (85). I never found the expected implied answer to this rhetorical question in Leon's book, but I was nevertheless charmed by the way that the question, like all things in this book, leads to Whitman.